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**State approves Tar Creek funds
Lead cleanup to continue at EPA Superfund site**

**By Gary Garton
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MIAMI, Okla. - Lead cleanup can continue in the Environmental Protection Agency's Tar Creek Superfund site now that the state has approved \$4 million in matching funds.

That makes \$35 million in federal and state money available for a variety of projects in the Tar Creek site, according to Michael Dean, spokesman for the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

The appropriation was stalled in the Legislature for nearly a year, with cleanup work continuing only on federally controlled properties.

Subcontractors for the EPA are cleaning up lead-contaminated soil at six Miami school properties and one in Picher, with separate matching funds having been provided specifically for that work. The next phase of the main Tar Creek work includes replacing soil at about 450 private properties and "high access" public properties in Picher, Cardin, Quapaw, Commerce and North Miami.

J.D. Strong, assistant to the state secretary of the environment, said Wednesday that the appropriation was included in bills that have been signed by the governor.

"This went through in the last couple of days of the last legislative session," Strong said. "The governor has signed the bill, and the money is being transferred to the ODEQ, which will work with EPA on continuing to clean up that area."

Sing Chia, coordinator of the EPA's Louisiana-Oklahoma Superfund region, said Wednesday that the soil replacement should resume in September, after completion of the Miami and Picher school cleanups.

Chia said the work will take a year to 18 months to complete.

He said videotapes will be made of all private properties showing their condition before the work is done. Some residents complained about the quality of work and resulting flooding from a previous subcontractor's soil replacement.

Don Walters, community liaison officer with the EPA's Region 6 headquarters in Dallas, said Wednesday that the agency had continued planning for the additional work even though the matching funds had not been secured.

"We felt the next phase had to be ready to go and were fairly confident Oklahoma would appropriate the money," he said. "We understand they've been having some statewide budget problems, but the work in the Tar Creek site has always been a high priority for the state."

Strong said the money was taken from the state's Rainy Day Fund, which is being tapped to supplement numerous budget shortfalls in state agencies this year.

Dean, with the state environmental agency, said the state and federal money will be used not only for soil replacement, but also for efforts to remove chat piles and other related projects.

"There are about 20 different projects we're looking at to keep the cleanup going," he said.

One of the projects will be the establishment of a state water quality office in Grove to monitor issues relating to the Grand Lake area. Dean said half the time of the person chosen for the office will be spent on Tar Creek-related water issues. Other potential threats to the watershed, including confined animal feeding operations and poultry production, will make up the rest of the job.

Gov. Frank Keating has said he does not believe the EPA's soil replacement work has been an adequate response to the environmental lead hazards in the area. At a local Tar Creek conference in May, Keating threatened to file a lawsuit against the federal agencies involved in the work: the EPA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Geological Survey. The governor's task force on Tar Creek recommended creating a wetlands in the former mining region, which would require buying out properties in Picher and Cardin.

Keating has said he believes that would be a more comprehensive approach to the environmental danger. But Oklahoma's congressional delegation has not supported the idea.

In January, a subcommittee of the White House Council on the Environment toured the Tar Creek site to study the current work and the possibility of funding a feasibility study for the wetlands project. The panel's report and recommendations have not yet been filed.